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# Dialogue Police, Decision Making, and the Management of Public Order During Protest Crowd Events

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Following unprecedented challenges to public order policing in the UK, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary conducted a detailed review of public order policing which emphasised the need to facilitate peaceful protest. The Association of Chief Police Officers revised its guidance manual accordingly to emphasise 'policing by consent', 'engagement and dialogue'. These guidelines, however, fit imperfectly with established practice and so police forces across the UK are revisiting understandings of crowd behaviour and public order tactics. The 2011 Liberal Democrat Spring conference in Sheffield, therefore, was both an interesting event in itself, and a critical test case for dialogue-based policing in the UK. This paper draws on empirical data to analyse the case study and tease out the lessons to be learned from what proved to be a successful policing operation.

Key Words: Protest; Dialogue Policing; Liaison; Negotiated Management

## **Introduction**

Under intense political and media scrutiny following a death during London's 2009 G20 summit protests (Rosie & Gorringer 2009); facing legal challenges after the Kingsnorth Climate Camp and the G20 (Bindmans 2011); coming to terms with the domestication of the European Convention of Human Rights; and challenged to *facilitate* peaceful protest by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary (HMCIC, 2009a and b); police forces across the UK are having to revisit accepted understandings of crowd behaviour and public order tactics. As the revised Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) guidance manual – *Keeping the Peace* – puts it: 'the world of protest has changed and public order and practice must change with it' (ACPO 2010: 7). At the heart of the revised guidance is the emphasis on 'policing by consent' and the assertion that 'engagement and dialogue should be used, whenever possible, to demonstrate a "no surprises" approach' (ibid. 11).

Against this backdrop the Liberal Democrats hosted their 2011 Spring Conference in Sheffield, home to party leader Nick Clegg's constituency. Public sector cuts and renegeing on a pledge to oppose student tuition fees meant that the conference became a focal point for dissent against the Coalition government. Given rumours of mass protests and with the presence of protected persons at the event, a zero-tolerance police approach might have been expected. Indeed, much media coverage and activist ire focused on an expensive and symbolically powerful fence surrounding the conference venue. Activists saw the barriers

as an over-reaction which signalled that demonstrators would be ‘kettled’; a concern partly fuelled by the student protests in London in December 2010. When demonstrators from that march occupied Conservative Party headquarters, the policing response became more robust and containment tactics were prominently deployed. Sheffield’s fence led onlookers to assume that the policing of the LibDem conference would see more of the same. From the outset, however, the police commander determined that the defining motif of policing in Sheffield would be facilitation, dialogue and liaison.

Sheffield’s LibDem Conference, therefore, was not only an interesting event in its own right, but a critical test case for dialogue-based policing in the UK. This paper draws on empirical data to offer an analysis of the case study and tease out the lessons to be learned from what proved to be a successful policing operation. We begin by charting recent developments in UK public order policing, then briefly review the literature on protest policing and dialogue models to place the data on Operation Obelisk (the police codename for this event), within a wider frame of reference.

### **Public Order Challenges & Dialogue Policing**

One might assume that the new ACPO guidelines would echo current police practice since UK policing has always emphasised policing by consent in contrast to more militarised styles elsewhere in Europe (Della Porta and Fillieule 2004). Indeed, forces in Scotland have been quick to assert that the ‘new’ ACPO guidelines simply echo what they already do (Rosie & Gorringer 2011). Over recent decades there has also been a shift away from police responses based on escalated force to an emphasis on negotiated management and dialogue (Waddington 2007). As Hoggett and Stott’s (2010) study of public order training shows, however, existing tactics in practice tend to revolve around arrest, containment and dispersal and are ill-equipped to deal with a new emphasis on dialogue and facilitation.

The HMCIC reports emphasised the limitations of existing tactics and models by highlighting the work of Sweden’s dialogue police. Since 2009, thus, UK forces have sought to innovate tactically and experiment with communicative approaches to protest policing (Gorringer et al. 2011; Thames Valley Police 2010). Commanders, however, have been hamstrung by the lack of operational exemplars from within the UK (Gorringer et al. 2011). In the absence of proven models, commanders may doubt the efficacy of liaison-

based tactics and rely on existing practice. It is in this context that Operation Obelisk assumes significance.

In recognising the capacity for police action to incite a crowd and turning away from discredited understandings of crowd behaviour the O'Connor reports (HMCIC, 2009a & b) drew upon two areas of research; the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM), which offers a theoretical basis for understanding crowd dynamics (Reicher et al. 2004; Stott et al. 2008), and studies of Scandinavian 'dialogue policing' (Holgersson and Knutsson 2010; Wahlstrom 2007). Both areas of work emphasise the need for flexible, reflexive and pre-emptive and/or preventative public order management.

The ESIM delineates the social and psychological processes through which certain tactics can unify a crowd in opposition to police and contribute to an escalation of conflict (Reicher, 1996; Stott and Reicher, 1998). Reicher et al. (2004; 2007) and Stott et al. (2008) outline several principles for effective public order policing: education, facilitation, communication and differentiation. Only by learning to appreciate the values, beliefs and objectives of protest groups can police avoid antagonism and facilitate the lawful objectives of crowd participants. Crucially, the ESIM stresses the need for ongoing attempts to meet the legitimate aims of crowd members *even when* there are signs of 'trouble', and insists that communication should not be neglected *during* crowd events, especially in situations of emerging tension (Reicher et al., 2004: 568).

There is a clear resonance between ESIM and the 'dialogue policing' now routinely adopted in Sweden. Indeed, the head of the Stockholm dialogue unit describes the ESIM as its theoretical rationale (Osterling 2011; cf Holggerson and Knuttson, 2010). In 2001's Gothenburg protests three demonstrators were shot and a further 150 injured in what was widely seen as a 'disaster' for Swedish police. In response, Sweden's National Police Board introduced the Special Police Tactic, a new system of crowd management using 'Dialogue Officers' tasked with contact and negotiation with dissident groups. The intention is to 'facilitate expressions of freedom of speech and the right to demonstrate', minimising confrontation, injury and destruction of property (Holgersson and Knuttson 2010: 15). The five essential components of dialogue policing are: Negotiation; Mediation; Initiation (suggesting possible solutions to problems); Communication; and Sensing (taking the 'temperature' of the crowd). Dialogue officers establish 'long term, mutually trusting

and respectful' relationships with protestors (Wahlstrom 2007: 397). They represent protestors' demands and concerns in meetings and aim to secure compromises and solutions that will satisfy all parties and minimise antagonism (Osterling 2011; Wahlstrom 2007). During protest events, dialogue officers try to uphold prior agreements, sustain communication between demonstrators and police, de-escalate potential conflicts, and report the changing moods of the crowd to police commanders.

Alvén (2010) emphasises the importance of transparency and predictability in dealings with protest groups. This tallies with Wahlstrom and Oskarsson's (2006:121) research on the importance of trust. They emphasise three key aspects: '(1) *reputation*: what is known of an actor's past actions; (2) *performance*: the present actions and results of the actor; and (3) *appearance*: the actor's presentation of their own trustworthiness.' In other words, the success of dialogue units depends not just on *what* they do, but on what they are *seen* to do and how this is interpreted within the crowd. Wahlstrom (2007), however, reserves judgement on the approach. Firstly, he notes tension between instrumental police objectives and the rhetoric of dialogue. Echoing Waddington's (1994) scepticism about negotiated management, Wahlstrom is unsure whether dialogue policing will result in 'genuinely more democratic forms of protest policing, or merely lead to nothing but more subtle forms of coercion' (2007: 400).

Secondly, as UK forces are discovering, moves towards dialogue are difficult in practice. Dialogue officers may be regarded as 'traitors' by colleagues (Holgersson and Knutsson, 2010) and as 'devious intelligence gatherers' by protestors (Gorringer et al. 2011). Wahlstrom (2007: 397) found that many commanders distrusted the tactic and resented having to engage with protestors with no desire to reciprocate, especially as the results of dialogue are not always immediately apparent. Holgersson and Knutsson (2010), however, insist that such internal opposition has eroded as the Swedish dialogue approach has resulted in less frequent and less severe instances of disorder.

This confidence in the methods and tactics of dialogue is currently absent in the UK. The shift in UK policing priorities has been sudden and largely unanticipated. Deaths at British protest events are rare (Rosie and Gorringer 2009), and public order policing has been overtaken by events. From both academic and policy-oriented perspectives, therefore, the need for empirically grounded and theoretically informed research is pressing. McSeveny

and Waddington's (2011) chapter on Operation Obelisk highlights the significance of South Yorkshire Police's use of social media and deployment of liaison officers. They argue that 'such officers are capable of correcting dangerously refracted perceptions and improving the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of tactical incursions' (ibid. 211). Their research confirms the significance of current innovations in policing and opens up an interesting debate about the efficacy of dialogue-style policing to which this paper contributes.

### **Methods and Event**

The following account of Operation Obelisk is based on an ethnographic approach in which the authors observed events on all three days of the conference either on the ground or in the police control room. Significantly, one of the authors served as a consultant during the planning phases of the operation and was able to engage in and document planning meetings. This allows us to chart how the concept of liaison evolved over the operation. We had unique access to planning meetings prior to the Conference, the police control room and key officers during it, and to commanders for post-event de-briefing sessions. Such access raises questions about objectivity. We should note that Stott was appointed as an academic expert and accepted the consultancy on the basis that he could use his observations for research purposes. All three authors have worked with different police forces and observed multiple events and were able to bring a critical comparative analysis to bear here. Finally, McSeveny and Waddington (2011) offer a broadly similar interpretation of some key incidents which affords us greater confidence in our analysis.

We adopted an 'observer-as-participant' role and mingled with protestors, capturing their experience of policing and interactions with the liaison team, and conducting 'in-situ' interviews. We noted salient points and events and held multiple conversations with police and protestors across all three days, interrogating motivations and rationales for behaviour. Following the events we reviewed newspaper and web coverage and were provided access to a police summary of social media surrounding the event (Newby 2011). We subsequently discussed events with operational officers and commanders both in a post-event briefing and during seven in-depth interviews with leading officers the week after. Notes and interviews were recorded and/or written up as soon as possible and circulated amongst the authors. Whilst participant observation is necessarily partial, our ability to gather data independently but then triangulate notes affords us confidence that our data

reflect the behavioural patterns of the events in general and enable us to delineate the key underlying processes.

The Liberal Democrat conference occurred over three days: Friday 11<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2011. The Friday saw a relatively small protest as delegates arrived. This allowed the liaison officers time to introduce themselves, make contact with some of the protest constituents, and sense the moods of the crowd. There were two main incidents that first evening. The first involved a conference delegate, Patrick Streeter, addressing and being confronted by the protestors. The second was the dwindling crowd's eventual decision to leave the designated protest site and cluster around the venue entrance. The main demonstrations were planned for Saturday when protestors gathered in a small park called Devonshire Green before moving along a pre-planned route to the conference venue. The key points were the rally at Devonshire Green, the march itself, and the demonstration outside the conference. On Sunday a protest was planned to coincide with the conclusion of the conference. Liaison officers were deployed on the ground and in the crowd on each of these days.

## **Planning**

Martin Scothern – the Event Silver - noted how protestors ‘framed’ the conference by reference to student demonstrations in London, as refracted through both media and the experiences of local students. Whilst police in Sheffield had assiduously built rapport with student leaders during local demonstrations in December 2010, Scothern observed, when *‘we came back to them again ... their attitude towards me was different ... So, that’s what started me thinking about how do we manage this relationship better’*.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, whilst Scothern accepted the recommendations of the HMIC reports regarding dialogue and liaison he felt there was no clarification for how to actually deploy their suggested ‘protest liaison officers’. As noted, therefore, one of the authors was brought in as a consultant to help define the strategy, tactical approach and role of a specifically created Police Liaison Team (PLT). As Scothern told us:

*I felt that we needed to nail down what we meant by protest liaison, to define it. And that was the bit for me that’s probably, at strategic level, the most significant.*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all quotes are taken from the interviews detailed at the end of the paper.

*... I am fairly confident that if I pick the right players ... that they deliver the products on the ground. But that doesn't work unless you actually define it and explain what it is.*

The planning phase, thus, focused on establishing a trusted team of liaison officers (“*the right players*”), on ensuring that they were fully aware of their responsibilities and had a properly defined role. This is significant given Wahlstrom’s (2007) finding that many officers pre-judge protests as either good or bad and dislike the uncertainty introduced by dialogue. Of equal concern was the question of ‘*how does the protest liaison strategy fit with the old world strategy?*’ (ibid.) One key challenge was to conceptualise how the PLTs would work not only in relation to the crowd but also to more familiar modes of public order policing: arrest, dispersal and containment.

Once the command team had been selected the key strategic priorities were finalised. Of particular importance was that the PLTs would be the operational basis for promoting ‘*effective communication*’ and ‘*relationships*’ between police and protestors. In addition, PLTs would enable ‘*dynamic risk assessment ... to influence police tactics*’. This aimed ‘*to create ... a graded tactical profile capable of avoiding the undifferentiated use of force*’; thus ‘*maximising perceptions of the crowds’ view of the legitimacy of police action*’ (Planning Meeting notes).

The deployment of PLTs aimed to achieve police legitimacy and proportionality in any intervention. Rather than controlling protestors, the primary aim was to communicate, understand and differentiate between them, better inform police responses and improve the flow of information. Significantly, it was agreed that Liaison would be the *primary* tactic. Given the experience of liaison teams elsewhere (Gorringe et al. 2011), these steps were of fundamental importance.

There was also considerable debate in the planning phase concerning the skill sets required by the PLTs. The two officers given the responsibility for developing the PLTs were qualified as *both* negotiators and trained public order commanders. This meant that they had a feel for the dialogue-based aspects of the role whilst retaining the trust of public order colleagues (*cf.* Wahlstrom 2007). Moreover, whilst PLT officers were recruited from various backgrounds – three were detectives – they shared proven “*communication*” and “*street skills*”. Indeed, according to one of the commanders:



*... being public order trained, can actually hold you back... It's a ... cultural shift to go from being stood there with a baton or a shield, to actually talking to some people that you probably, in reality, some of the staff wouldn't have had any common ground with. (Barber)*

Some of those recruited were initially sceptical. Barber noted how some '*thought it was going to be a bit soft and fluffy and a bit pink. But actually, [they] could see the benefits. So actually, I think we have converted some of them*'.

Several police respondents also felt that their background as negotiators brought competencies that proved particularly useful preceding the event, not least building relationships with protest groups. Perhaps of greater significance were the protocols governing how the PLTs were tied into the command structure which reflected those generally adopted by negotiating teams. Specifically, during the event, the PLTs were kept separate - or 'sterile' - from the operational command radio channels so that they would be unaware of other police deployments. Moreover, they were required to communicate through 'PLT Silver' (Superintendent Barber) located in Command and Control alongside the Event Silver. The PLT Silver was then required to write regular reports from the PLTs for Silver.

### **Gateways to Trust**

Key officers had read up on the theory and practice of liaison, but this knowledge was yet to be tested in practice and so suspicions remained. As Green, PLT Bronze, reflected: '*it is an easy thing to read, isn't it, an academic paper that says crowds will self police*'. Moreover, there were uncertainties about how to engage with more radical groups. The PLTs made extensive efforts to contact protest groups ahead of events, but as Barber pointed out, there were only "*about 5 real groups that we had managed to make contact with*" and "*we were never going to [manage to] involve the more radical protestors*".

Liaison officers, thus, remained somewhat ambivalent and apprehensive about their role. From this perspective they were fortunate on the first evening. Events began late afternoon on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> with a 'school walkout' and other protests, but by around four o'clock fewer than one hundred protestors were in the city centre. Nonetheless, Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) attired in normal uniforms with pale blue vests marked 'Liaison Officer', chatted to

protestors, handing out information leaflets, and making themselves visible and available. PLOs engaged people by explaining the primary objectives of the police operation and of their specific role.

The PLOs saw immediate benefits to their deployment. As noted above, despite multiple efforts, the more radicalised groups had resisted attempts to communicate with them in advance. But during the first protest a leading figure from one such group set up a table to distribute leaflets, enabling the PLTs to start establishing a relationship. It was here that their negotiation skills proved valuable.

*We had tried to make contact. Yeah, we tried a number of ways, we left a number of voicemails. So actually, when I first went over to speak to him, I introduced myself, and said: 'we were trying to get hold of you yesterday'. What about? And then, said, look, that's what we are here for.*

Interviewer: *So this was your first concrete opportunity to start actually talking?*

*And actually, one of the things that we had said, someone had said to you when we were debating in that planning phase was, I think any cops can go and talk to all these people. Those that are perhaps harder to engage, don't really want to, that is when you should be using people with specific skills. (Green)*

A second break-through came when protestors, by now numbering several hundred, moved towards Barkers Pool abutting the City Hall conference venue. At one end of the street the crowd was confronted by a steel fence, at the other they found a set of temporary gates. The immediate impression among demonstrators was that these gates would allow the police to 'kettle' them. This information was fed back to Silver:

*And Scott's first request through me was to ask Martin [Scothern] about consideration to actually remove [the gates]. So, Martin and I had a conversation and I think Martin's compromise was appropriate: 'I am not taking them away because they are a safety feature, however, as a compromise to the groups, we will involve their stewards if we need to close those gates'. So that was then fed back to Scott [Green], to say can you speak to them and see how acceptable that was. (Barber).*

With intelligence of large crowds in the centre of Sheffield, and against the context of the Hillsborough disaster, the police saw the gates as a safety mechanism to be closed - *if necessary* - to prevent crushing. So focused were they on such concerns, according to Scothern that: *'We never saw that, that they would interpret those gates as being a means*

*to contain. We never thought about that in a million years. But we got that back from the PLT*. As Scothern reflected, the PLTs early operational value was that they were able to feed back accurately on what protestors were thinking. This information allowed him to offset perceptions of police illegitimacy by asking the organising groups to manage the gates themselves. Three key things were accomplished here: PLOs gained a sense of what they could achieve, the senior commander's theoretical attachment to the model was given substance, and the crowd started to interact with the PLOs.

Shortly afterwards, Patrick Streeter, a Liberal Democrat conference delegate made his way into the crowd and attempted to address it. His presence provoked an angry response from sections of the crowd prompting a PLT to make its way through the protestors. Significantly, they stood in the vicinity but did not intervene. After quickly assessing the situation the PLT Bronze contacted Silver and requested him *'not to do anything'*. This PLT response was framed by the understanding developed through their earlier interactions with the crowd concerning perceptions of police illegitimacy:

*There were a number of people, particularly senior members of Sheffield Anti Cuts Alliance who said 'this fence should not be here, we should be allowed to go in there and protest'. So there is already a question about legitimacy, the police putting this big fence up. And then, well, if you then try to send these people [public order officers] in to see what is happening over there, there are further questions about [legitimacy]. (Green)*

Green's invocation not to 'do anything', led us to ask the Public Order Bronze commander what might have happened without the PLTs. He confirmed that *'I would have deployed somebody to get [Streeter] out'* (Mutch). All respondents recognised the potentially negative impact of such an intervention for the perceived legitimacy of the police and the efficacy of the PLTs. The question of what to do with Streeter remained. Green describes how the PLOs moved close *'in case he needed to be got out of there'*, but then stood by and watched *'almost as invisible observers'*. He described how Streeter was initially heckled before other crowd members insisted he should be allowed to speak. At this point Green felt that the theoretical papers on crowd dynamics made sense. *'Actually'*, he noted, *'that is the first time I have stood in a crowd and watched that self-policing take place'*.

PLT respondents spoke of how these incidents demonstrated to them that their earlier engagements had been worthwhile because they had apparently been *'accepted by the*

*crowd*' and were able to move through it without hindrance. As Green reflected "*that was sort of, the first time I thought, well we are actually doing now, what we said we would. We are in the crowd, we are listening to them, we are getting a sense of how they feel. We are interpreting what impact the police actions are having on the crowd*". Moreover, the self-regulation of the crowd was understood by the police as a direct outcome of the PLTs and the resultant lack of alternate intervention.

The final event on Friday occurred when the crowd spontaneously made their way round to the delegate's entrance. As the Public Order Bronze noted, '*There was intelligence to say that they were going to blockade the delegate's entrance, you know, and I thought that was realistic*' (Mutch). Given this, the move could have been interpreted as a dangerous escalation. As the protestors regrouped some delegates faced verbal harassment from the crowd. Consequently public order units were deployed to the entrance and created a cordon to protect delegates.

The PLTs had followed the crowd and according to Green now experienced a near epiphany:

*All the things that I have experienced in my career came to fruition then ... So we, initially, we ended up stood with this line of police officers in yellow, facing the crowd. And I don't know how long we were stood there for, by my guess it would be 15 – 20 seconds. And almost immediately all of us thought; 'no, this isn't where we should be, we should be stood in there'. So as I stepped forward to say to my team, we need to be in the crowd facing back that way, they were all doing it at exactly the same time. And for me, that was so significant, it was self-evident that all of my team understood what their role was, including me at that point. And that the crowd did as well. And that, for me, was the moment where I suddenly thought, I know exactly what we are to do now. (Green)*

The apparent legitimacy and acceptance of the PLTs was vividly illustrated by a decision to move the protest group slightly back from the conference entrance to facilitate access. The PLTs moved through the crowd explaining this so that when the Public Order Bronze asked the crowd to move back and his yellow jacketed officers stepped forward there were 'no surprises'. More significantly, a handful who objected were urged to pull back by radical activists in the crowd who had been engaged earlier by the PLTs (Fieldnotes). Over the course of the first evening, thus, the PLTs came to believe in the tactic and realise both *how*

it should work and that it *did* work. Furthermore, they began forging a reputation with both crowd and police colleagues.

### **Flare Ups**

On Saturday morning a much larger and more diverse demonstration congregated on Devonshire Green. PLOs were much in evidence – mingling within the crowd of approximately four thousand, handing out leaflets and chatting to people about their role, the march and the weather. There were few other officers in evidence: operational commanders had noted continuing rumours about kettling and many units had instructions not to leave their vans (Leake).. Indeed, the Public Order Bronze explained that his key concern ‘*was hiding staff to allay the fears of people*’. Thus it was that when Patrick Streeter (‘*don’t you just love him?*’, one respondent said) re-appeared, trying to seize a microphone and provoking hostility, the PLTs were immediately to hand. They swiftly lead the delegate away, urging the protestors surging around Streeter to return to the Green. Notably, they calmed protestors by urging them not to ‘*give him the publicity*’ rather than by ordering them back (Fieldnotes).

It is worth recalling that ‘*every time ... more than two or three police officers came near them, they were, “oh that’s it, we are going to get kettled then are we? Are you preparing to kettle us?”*’ (Leake). The ability to extract Streeter without fuss was significant. The enhanced legitimacy of the PLTs was emphasised just before the march when the chief steward rallied protestors before closing with two key points. The first was to reassure the crowd about the gates in Barkers Pool. He stressed that he had been concerned by them, but had agreed that they would be manned by stewards not police and only closed in the event of over-crowding. Finally he encouraged members of the crowd who had any questions to approach a steward *or* ‘one of the blue vested liaison officers’. A solitary and somewhat ironic ‘boo’ rang out from the crowd which was met by widespread laughter.

Legitimacy, however, was not a given; it needed to be constantly reinforced. Indeed, as the march reached the conference venue, a protestor approached the PLT Bronze who was taking a photo:

*As I took it, a ... protestor said to me: ‘what are you doing that for, you are an intelligence team aren’t you?’ So I said ‘no, we’re not, we are a liaison team; this is what we do’. And I said, actually, I’m taking it for Twitter, and he didn’t believe me. So I said, ‘come here, I’ll show you’ [and] Tweeted it in front of him. And he*

*said; 'I can't believe it. I can't believe that that is what you are here for'. Then I went through the role of the liaison team with him. About 10 minutes later, he sent out a Tweet, which was really positive ... to say 'this is how policing protest should be'. (Green)*

Central to the emphasis on facilitation was communication. Alongside liaison, SYP had a social media strategy to inform and engage both protestors and the wider public (*cf.* McSeveny and Waddington 2011). SYP's Facebook and Twitter pages were inundated with messages of surprise, thanks and support for the 'helpful', 'friendly' and 'positive' policing (Newby 2011). As McSeveny and Waddington (2011: 209) found, however, the response was not uniformly encouraging. On Sheffield Indymedia, we found one exchange illustrating the potential pitfalls of social media. SYP posted a reassurance that the crowd would not be 'kettled', adding 'this is not a recognised method of crowd control by South Yorkshire Police'. A critic immediately contradicted this claim with a (faulty) link to an article purporting to show that 'SYP does use kettling'. Inspector Jayne Forest answered back re-iterating the original point whereupon the critic posted the working link urging SYP to 'stop this deliberate deception'. SYP made no response (Indymedia 2011). This non-response illustrated the limitations of such an approach. Overall, though, this exchange captures SYP's innovative attempts to reach out to more radical groups, personalise their communications strategy and enter into dialogue with those who would not normally talk to the police.

The PLTs and social media team, thus, were communicating police intentions and actions to the crowd. This much was anticipated in advance. As Green put it: *'I made the assumption that one of our key roles would be to interpret for the crowd, what the police were doing'* (Green). As the PLTs settled into the crowd, however, they began to pick up on rumours, fears and emotions and feed them back to commanders. Green concluded that ultimately, *'I think we interpreted to the police what the crowd were doing, rather than the other way round'*.

One concrete example came when police numbers were doubled around the City Hall in anticipation of a shift-change. There was palpable unease with some protestors chanting *'Police state!'* (Fieldnotes) The Public Order Commander at the time sensed *'something, but I couldn't put my finger on it'*. The PLOs had a clearer grasp: *'phew, the tension went*

*right up then because they thought you were going to do something'* (Green). Inspector Mutch was simply *'sending officers for their tea'* and conceded that there was *'just a total lack of understanding on our part of how that crowd thinks about what's going on ... it was a big wake up for me that'* (Mutch).

As Green noted: *'We are in the crowd, we are listening to them, we are getting a sense of how they feel. We are interpreting what impact the police actions are having'*. PLTs, thus, were providing real-time information about crowd dynamics that, Barber argued, *'you wouldn't have got'* otherwise. Following this, future shift-changes were carefully choreographed and communicated in advance, meaning that the next change was met with amused cries of *'Doughnut break!'* (Fieldnotes).

The success of the PLTs here appears to have rested on their position within the crowd, but their location is a point of contention for two reasons: the safety of the officers concerned and their relations to crowd members. As regards safety, Green noted, the bottom-line *'was for the bronze commander with the geographical responsibility for that area to say; I can't get you out of there if something goes wrong'*. With the good-natured crowd in Sheffield this hardly seemed like a priority, but as Silver put it: *'The knockers would come in and say, yeah, of course it will work, you've got a negotiable crowd. But it's not until you get into Saturday, for me, that I start to see the real ... argument for this kind of activity'* (Scothern).

Scothern was referring to a point on Saturday when flares were set off in the midst of the dense crowd. One demonstrator with a flare jumped over a barricade at the top of Barkers Pool. He was immediately arrested, but despite some whistles, boos and chants there was no real sense of injustice, nor further attempt to breach police lines (Fieldnotes). The PLTs decided to deal with this on the ground and made their way through the crowd to talk to two young men dancing up and down with flares. As two liaison officers approached people surged forward to see what was happening and to photograph and video the police response. The officers swiftly defused a tricky situation by engaging in good-natured dialogue, pointing out the dangers of burning and that several people were already covered in ash (Fieldnotes).

Two of the authors were on the spot. From this perspective the PLOs appeared to have settled things and departed, but it later transpired that they had been ordered out due to concerns for their safety. According to Silver, *'it's horrendous on CCTV. It looks like the crowd are swarming around him'*. Whilst Green *'felt perfectly at ease in the crowd'* his focus on the incident meant that there was a delay in relaying that information back to Silver. There was a concern that the PLT Bronze may have been dragged out of role – or 'gone native' - and not been fully alert to potential risks. Reflecting back on this, all the officers felt that there were lessons to be learned. Green reflected that perhaps he should have stayed back and let others deal with the flares whilst he maintained contact.

The incident also highlights the dangers of relying on CCTV images in isolation. Operating within the crowd the PLTs offered a more 'accurate' ground-level and real-time analysis of risk and ensured that there would be no hasty reactions. The PLTs demonstrated the capacity for low-key dialogue and communication to defuse tense situations. Reminding flare-wielding young men of others around them in the crowd who might get hurt by their antics appears to have been effective, perhaps more so than a reprimand, caution or intervention by public order units would have been.

Two further events underlined the benefits of liaison. Firstly, a group of UK Uncut activists broke away from the march and staged symbolic occupations of some high street shops. The police response was to deploy a temporary barrier between the shops and the protest crowd. This offered a powerful non-verbal signal of the limits to police toleration. Simultaneously, however, liaison officers interacted with the more radical activists and encouraged them back onto the demonstration.

In this more heated atmosphere the PLOs were instrumental in preventing an escalation of police action as the protest wound down. Commanders were on edge due to intelligence of renewed UK Uncut actions. Of particular concern was a group dancing to an impromptu sound system in Barkers Pool. One young protestor began defacing a wall in clear view of cctv feeds to the Command centre. As Silver began to order his arrest the PLT Bronze shouted *'it's chalk, chalk'* into his radio (Fieldnotes). Being much closer to the scene, Green clarified that the graffiti was not being painted or sprayed on, but drawn with chalk. Subsequently, in a defining moment for the operation, the young 'artist' diligently wiped the chalk off the wall under the watchful eye of a female officer. Aggressive intervention at



any of the above points would doubtless have seen some within the crowd complain of ‘political policing’. Instead the protest ended amicably with most people seeming to feel that their voices had been heard – notably, very few activists returned on the Sunday.

### **Concluding Discussion**

The deployment of liaison officers is no isolated innovation, but part of a wider UK move towards proactive and dialogue-based policing consciously echoing the pioneering work of Swedish dialogue units. The aims and achievements of Operation Obelisk, thus, have wider relevance. Commanders elsewhere have been hindered by the fact that liaison methods were not yet ‘tried and trusted’ in a UK setting. The liaison strategy in Sheffield, thus, offers a template to be adopted and adapted. In the following analysis of events, thus, we think through lessons to be learned.

The success of the PLT tactic in Sheffield, we contend, began long before the Conference. In the planning stage, the command team determined that liaison would be the *primary* tactic. Although SYP have no dedicated dialogue team extending beyond this operation, many of the issues encountered by Swedish dialogue officers were addressed. The operation team, thus, consulted relevant empirical and theoretical evidence, invited expert input and hand-picked officers capable of delivering proactive policing. Unlike innovations elsewhere (Gorringe et al. 2011), the PLTs were fully structured into the operation, integrated into key discussions and deployed in advance of the event.

Whilst many of Sheffield’s PLOs were trained negotiators (unlike their Swedish counterparts; Alven 2010), most were also public-order trained and, thus, not pigeon-holed as ‘fluffy’. Their specific skill-sets were less important than the processes that characterise negotiation. Vitally the team followed a structure that placed a PLT coordinator in constant contact with the Event Silver. Early on they also echoed negotiators in using a ‘bunch of fives’ with protestors (providing five reasons why a certain action makes sense), and emphasising promised police actions (‘we said we would do this and we did’) and deliverables (‘we can do this for you’).

In our view, commitment to liaison paid off on multiple counts. Firstly, PLTs offered high-quality ground-level information that commanders could not have accessed by other means. Real-time contextualised knowledge enabled dynamic risk assessments about whether,

when and how to intervene proportionately. At key points PLT input gave commanders an accurate sense of moods within the crowd, allowing them to defuse tensions and engage radical activists. Whilst PLTs expected to communicate police actions to the crowd, their key contribution lay in their ability to mitigate the police tendency to intervene and to correct police assumptions and pre-conceptions. Far from the impression of PLTs as ‘intelligence gatherers’, their capacity to ‘police the police’ and place decisions and possible actions in context helped to establish the legitimacy of police actions – and to limit police interventions - over the course of the weekend. This aspect of the role was not envisaged at the outset.

Questions arise, of course, as to how this model would fare in the face of larger, more radical or more mobile protests. The Sheffield crowd (never more than 5,000) meant that the dozen officers deployed as PLOs remained visible and accessible throughout. Given the need to mingle with people and fears about the safety of the officers in the crowd could this tactic be used for mass marches? Evidence from Sweden suggests that it could (Holgersson and Knutsson 2010), though it is clearly no panacea (Wahlstrom 2007). Discussions around the flare suggest the need for a more formal structure of communication between PLOs, PLT Bronze and the command room - and protocols detailing how, when and which officers should intervene. Police-protestor interactions are likely to invite compaction as people surge round with cameras. To avoid a situation where CCTV is the only basis for monitoring this, it makes sense for a liaison officer tasked with communicating to the control room to stand off the interaction and offer a more detached view of proceedings.

Our analysis also stresses that police legitimacy is not a given. It can be lost or created through dynamic interactions. Scothern noted how the policing of student protests in London affected how students in Sheffield viewed SYP. Equally, however, as Reicher et al. (2004: 561) argue, ‘groups have collective memories which can sometimes go back well beyond the experience or even the lifetime of any individual member’. Gorringe and Rosie (2008) similarly note how a local ‘history’ of police-protest interaction can shape future encounters. It is too early to tell what impact SYP’s experiment with liaison will have, but Theobald (2011) suggests that the emphasis on communication and proactive policing may partly explain why South Yorkshire escaped the riots that spread across other English cities in summer 2011. The social media engagement, pioneered above, was instrumental in reassuring and communicating with the public.

Equally significantly, Obelisk persuaded sceptical officers of the efficacy of dialogue. Given the largely consensual nature of the protests, the jury remains out on whether liaison can facilitate more democratic policing (Wahlstrom 2007), but the fact that UK Uncut protestors were ushered back onto the main march suggests that it may have begun to blur police binaries of between ‘legitimate and illegitimate’ protest. For many years academics and others – including HMIC (2009a, 2009b) - have looked to Swedish Dialogue units for inspiration on proactive, consensual policing. They still lead the field, but following McSeveny and Waddington’s (2011) work and our analysis of Operation Obelisk we contend that we now have a template for successful police liaison in the UK.

### **Cited Interviews**

All interviews were conducted by Stott and Gorrington in Howdenhall Police Station, Sheffield on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2011:

Martin Scothern, Event Silver Commander, Superintendent SYP.

Rachel Barber, PLT Co-ordinator, Superintendent SYP.

Neil Mutch, PSU Bronze commander for conference venue, Inspector SYP.

Scott Green, PLT Bronze commander, Chief Inspector SYP.

Simon Leake, PSU Bronze commander for march, Chief Inspector SYP.

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